English and Language Arts—A Guided Tour Through the State of the Art

by
Charles Suhor

Teachers, supervisors, and researchers frequently look to ERIC for concise information about developments in English and language arts. While a search of the database yields documents aplenty, the Clearinghouse gets increasing demands from front-line educators for shorter publications like single-sheet Digests and other summary materials on important topics. This article attempts a "quick read" overview of various recent trends in the profession. The references—mostly from the last three years to assure currency—point to lengthier resources for follow-up reading.

To provide some emphasis, key phrases are italicized. A few works of particular importance are identified as "perspective-making documents"—that is, works which are (or promise to be) a lens through which the profession views major issues.

This overview ranges widely but is by no means all-inclusive. For example, a teacher working with dialogue journals or a scholar interested in narratology might wonder why these valued topics aren't noted. ERIC has materials on such topics in the database and in its publication program (e.g., Kreeft, 1983; Pradl, 1984). But choices for inclusion and exclusion were essential in creating this thumbnail portrait of the state-of-the-art.

If there is a single recurring theme in recent literature, it is the search for unity in various aspects of English language arts. Integrating the language arts, teaching the humanities, using whole language instruction, encouraging higher order thinking skills, and teaching composition through process instruction are but a few examples of the strain toward integration. Of course, the counter-theme in the literature is not advocacy of fragmentation of subject matter for its own sake. Rather, many believe that frames of reference other than (or perhaps in addition to) the holistic viewpoint are needed in articulating instructional practice or evaluating student progress. These themes and others will emerge in the ERIC's-eye view below.

COMPOSITION

The greatest upsurge of interest in recent years has been in the teaching and learning of writing. *Writing process instruction* (D. Graves, 1983; Hays, et al., 1983) draws upon knowledge of how writers actually compose, emphasizing both prewriting and revising in ways that are not common in most classrooms (Applebee, 1981). Although sometimes confused with less disciplined "prewriting" approaches of the late 1960s (Rodrigues, 1985), process instruction is a genuine reorchestration of both old and new pedagogies.

Information about process instruction and other aspects of composition has been widely disseminated, especially through ERIC, NCTE, and the National Writing Project (Myers, 1985). In the last two years, 370 questions related to composition were answered at ERIC/RCS, and recent ERIC books on writing (e.g., Kahn, et al., 1984) have been widely disseminated.

Of course, ubiquity does not necessarily imply that new insights are being formulated and ordered. Important perspective-making documents like George Hillocks' (1986) *Research on Written Composition*, a meta-analysis embracing hundreds of composition studies, help to sort out the effectiveness of traditional and innovative teaching methods. Hillocks' findings generally support some aspects of process instruction, such as emphasis on discussion and revision. But his work also suggests the utility of the traditional study of models of excellent writing—which is, of course, an element in some process models; and his expansive analysis lends support to sentence combining exercises. Consistent with conventional in-depth reviews on writing research (e.j., Mellon, 1967), Hillocks finds no evidence that study of formal grammar improves students' writing.

The influence of NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) and state and local English specialists has solidified a long-evolving change in external testing—viz., the extensive *use of actual writing samples in testing writing* (Hadley, 1984). While research demonstrating that such tests actually drive instruction is scant, an ample body of expert testimony and a small number of studies indicate that "objective" tests encourage worksheet instruction while tests with writing samples promote writing in the classroom (Suhor, 1985).

Writing across the curriculum is another highly visible movement. The goal here is not to make every teacher into an English specialist but to encourage teachers to help students use writing as a way of learning—i.e., as a way of organizing and giving shape to nascent ideas (Thaiss, 1986). The movement parallels and supports trends such as cross-disciplinary and humanities instruction and the teaching of higher order thinking skills.

Another important trend, the *use of computers in writing instruction*, is focusing increasingly on revising, since word processing software permits the student to do extensive revision without requiring time-consuming handwritten copies (Wheeler, 1985). However, the need for keyboard skills (Rothenberg, 1984) and the *lack of adquate models for teacher training* in computer-assisted writing instruction continue to be limiting factors (O'Donnell, 1985).

Class size, an intensively studied educational problem, is now being explored specifically in terms of composition instruction. Some states (e.g., Florida, Vermont) have already limited the number of students in high school composition classes, permitting teachers to spend more time responding to students' writing. But there is a lack of solid empirical evidence linking class size and effective composition instruction. A new ERIC publication by William L. Smith (1986) and the NCTE Task Force on class size suggests the kinds of studies that might throw new light on the subject.

READING

Like composition, reading is a field marked by change and controversy in recent years. However, in 1985 a perspective-making document, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, et al.), was published. The volume did not quell longstanding controversy over issues such as the roll of phonics instruction, readability formulas, and the testing of reading; but it did offer some balanced viewpoints by one group of noted scholars and practitioners, (Koenke, 1986).

A look at the larger body of literature on reading instruction, though, suggests that polarized viewpoints are unlikely to vanish. Advocates of *whole language approaches* continue to stress holistic, transactional pedagogy, holding that isolated skills instruction gives attention to decoding at the expense of comprehension (Watson, 1985). Others see part-to-whole instruction as essential for beginning readers, claiming that *phonics-based programs* are most effective (Flesch, 1985; Groff, 1985). Attempts at *integrated approaches* (e.g., Botel and Seaver, 1984) can be found, in line with the spirit of *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, which takes a middle ground on decades-old issues. Koenke suggests that differences among reading specialists can be seen as existing as on a continuum, with positions shifting over time as new research provides more useful guides to practice.

Current research emphases in reading are varied, but many are in the direction of *integrating reading with other human capacities*. For example, ethnographic studies (e.g., Siegel, 1984) view the printed word from a *semiotic viewpoint*. Print is seen as one among many symbol systems that children learn to "read" in the course of their cognitive development. John Henry Martin's "Writing to Read" program, evaluated favorably by Educational Testing Service (Murphy and Appel, 1984), approaches *reading instruction as integrated with student writing*. Martin uses computer technology to teach a simplified alphabet that permits students to write fluently before they can decode conventional spelling.

Little's (1985) review of the literature of *computers and reading instruction* notes that bolder approaches like Martin's writing/reading program are relatively rare. Short-term studies dealing with simple drill and practice software are far more common. Such problems prompted the International Reading Association (1984) to publish guidelines for teacher use of computers. Moreover, groups like EPIE (Educational Products Information Exchange) provide ongoing evaluation of software in reading and other disciplines.

Finally, *textbooks in reading* have received extensive scrutiny. Texts that are "dumbed down" supposedly to make them accessible to poor readers, actually become less comprehensible, according to Armbruster (1984). For example, texts with short, simple sentences lack both the connective words and the syntactic richness that give form and direction to the ideas in texts of normal complexity. *Readability formulas*, Cullinan and Fitzgerald note (Maxwell and Allen, 1984), encourage vapid, tedious texts. Goodman (1985) holds that basal readers lack the motivating qualities of real narratives and can frustrate the primary goal of producing students who read for enjoyment and enlightenment.

The readability of *textbooks in content areas* is hampered by the phenomenon of "mentioning"—that is, publishers feel that materials are marketable only if they include all the topics called for in typical school curricula. Hence, the need to "mention" a plethora of topics necessitates cluttered and superficial expositions that prompt students to memorize information rather than engage in critical and analytical thinking (Dronca, 1985). Further, studies by M. Graves (1984) reveal that school materials rewritten by journalists from *Time* magazine were far more intelligible than those written by either linguists or authors from textbook companies. Textbook publishers have also been criticized for bowdlerizing literary works—through changes or omissions—without stating in the text that changes have been made (maxwell and Allen, 1985).

LITERATURE

Specialists in the teaching of literature such as Darwin Turner have pointed to an apparent *decline in literary study in the schools* (Bryant, et al. 1984). The basic skills movement and many proposals for high school reform underplayed the study of literature. The idea of literature as an exploration of the human condition has received less attention than literature as an extension of reading skills instruction.

However, recent reform documents have stressed rigor and serious inquiry in school curricula, and there is now *evidence of renewed interest* in literature as part of our cultural heritage (Fancher, 1984). The return to an interest in the *content* of the literature curriculum has repoened old questions and shaped some new ones as well. Debates over the place of young adult literature and an established canon of literary works are reappearing (Bernstein, 1984). High school literature textbooks of the mid-1980s are leaning towards the classics again, resembling the thick, hardbound standard anthologies of the 1950s that emphasized great authors and famous works. Also, new variations on core curriculum and humanities approaches are appearing, such as E. D. Hirsch's (1985) concept of "cultural literacy."

English teachers are also attempting to *adapt contemporary literary criticism* to their classrooms—a difficult task, since so many teachers have been comfortable either with historical/biographical criticism or with the close-analysis-of-text advanced in the New Criticism. After a brief vogue of myth criticism that reached a peak in the 1960s, numerous critical approaches have competed for the attention of scholars and classroom teachers. Structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism, response theory, semiotics, Marxist analysis, and feminist criticism are approaches that have made their mark in the universities (Cantor, 1985). But apparently a combination of elements—from inertia to common sense to the abstruseness of much contemporary literary theory—has discouraged classroom applications. Shuman (1984) has attempted a brief and lucid explanation of several modern theories for secondary teachers. Fink (1985) has provided a concrete example of classroom deconstructionist analysis of a Shakespearean sonnet.

Although it is too early to sort out the influence of competing theories, two seem to be well suited to application in elementary and secondary schools. *Reader response theory*, especially Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory, is based on the psychology of the learner and draws upon psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge. As Cunningham and Luk (1985) note, semiotics also provides a frame of reference in which the student as learner is accounted for, and the literature curriculum is cast as a sign system rich in possibilities for interaction with the reader.

Finally, *political and moral concerns* are still highly visible in discussions of school literature programs. Speaking of teaching moral values in general, Bennett holds that instilling a coherent moral vision is part of the role of public education (Janson, 1986). Insofar as students in English programs explore the values and decisions of fictional and historical figures, the exercise of moral education seems inherent in literary study (DeMott, 1984). Some have argued that parents have such a stake in the schools' treatment of moral values and students' personal opinions that safeguards should be established in schools (Schlafly, 1985). Hence, there is now considerable controversy over the range of application of the Hatch Amendment to the General Education Provisions Act of 1978 (Hogan, 1985). Additionally, *censorship questions* continue to be argued in the courts, with recent cases focusing on works from Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to Judy Blume's *Then Again, Maybe I Won't.*

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

The "cutting edge" influences on the teaching of speaking and listening continue to be *rooted in cognitive psychology*—notably, the thinking of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Luria. Instructional applications are *drawn from recent writings in psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics* (e.g., F. Smith, 1981; Halliday, 1981), with translators like Moffett and Wagner (1983) providing the most expansive classroom applications.

Concern with speaking is focused on two areas—classroom interaction and student dialects. Interest in *classroom interaction* is linked directly with process approaches to writing instruction, because student discussion is an important part of both prewriting and peer evaluation. Theory, research, and practice of group discussion in the classroom have been a vital part of the literature of language arts education for over a decade (e.g., Book and Galvin, 1975). More recently, the case for classroom interaction has been strongly linked to multidisciplinary *research in cooperative learning* (e.g., Johnson, et al., 1984). Additionally, writers like Staton (1983) and Kirby and Kuykendall (1985) have now shown practical ways of linking classroom interaction with the *development of students' thinking skills.*

With regard to the question of *student dialects*, some clarifications of the effects of nonstandard dialect on classroom performance have been made. For example, Farr and Daniels (1986) point to research indicating that the influence of *spoken* nonstandard usage on the individual's *written* expression is less extensive than had been previously assumed. Labov, however, notes an increasing distance between certain aspects of nonstandard dialect in Black speakers and standard English, despite predictions that dialect differences in America would narrow because of the presumed homogenizing effects of television, radio, and film (Stevens, 1985).

School programs geared towards teaching standard English appear to be gaining ground (Hooper, 1985). But the teaching methods in second dialect instruction still follow the tried-and-untrue route of formal grammar instruction, according to Rubin (1984). Reviewing the literature of oral language instruction and its influence on writing, Rubin concludes that *classroom practices such as role-switching activities, peer questioning, forensic discussion, and other interactive methods* hold greatest promise for affecting standard English instruction.

The references below are, in general, "first resort" documents for further information on the topics discussed in this article. Further information and extensive searches can be obtained through User Services, ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

References

Anderson, Richard C., et al. *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission On Reading.* Champaign, Ill.: Center for the Study of Reading, 1985, ED 253 865

Applebee, Arthur N. *Writing in the Secondary School: English and the Content Areas.* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981. ED 197 347

Armbruster, Bonnie. "How Is a Turtle Like a Frog?" *American Educator* 8, No. 2 (1984): 14-17 EJ 305 017

Bernstein, Harriet. "What Literature Should Adolescents be Reading?" *ASCD Update* November 1984.

Book, Cassandra, and Kathleen Galvin. *Instruction in and about Small Group Discussion.* Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills; Annandale, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1975. ED 113 773

Botel, Morton, and JoAnn T. Seaver. "Phonics Revisited: Toward an Integrated Methodology." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Keystone State Reading Association, Hershey, Pennsylvania, November 11-14, 1984. ED 252 819

Bryant, Paul T.,et al. "Trends and Issues in English Instruction, 1984— Four Summaries." ED 240 606

Cantor, Norman. "The Real Crisis in the Humanities Today." *The New Criterion* 3, No. 10 (1985): 28-38.

Cunningham, Donald, and H. Luk. "Student as Semiotician." Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Convention, Chicago, March-April 1985.

DeMott, Benjamin. "The Humanities and the Summoning Reader." In *The Humanities in Precollegiate Education,* edited by Benjamin Ladner. Part II, Eighty-third yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Dronca, Pamela. "Will a Third Round of Reform Take the Textbook to Task?" *ASCD Update* 27, No. 6 (1985): 1, 6-7.

Fancher, Robert T. "English Teaching and Humane Culture." In *Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America's High Schools,* edited by Chester F. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch, and Robert T. Fancher. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1984. ED 253 489

Farr, Marcia and H. Daniels. *Teaching Writing to Non-Mainstream Students: What Have Learned from Research?* Urbana, Ill,: National Council of Teachers of English and ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills; ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, 1986.

Flesch, Rudolph. "Why Can't Johnny Read? We Taught Him Incorrectly." *Education Week* (June 12, 1985): 28.

Goodman, Kenneth. "Basal Readers: A Call for Action." Unpublished paper written for the Commission on Reading, NCTE, 1985.

Graves, Donald H. *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work.* Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983, ED 234 430

Graves, Michael. "Could Books be Better Written and Would It Make a Difference?" Paper presented at the Convention on Textbook Reform: The Cooperative Agenda, Washington, D.C., June 1985.

Groff, Patrick. *Myths of Reading Instruction. Revised Edition.* Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1985.

Hadley, Connie. "Direct Writing Assessments in the States." Education Commission of the States, *Issuegram* (September 26, 1984).

Halliday, M.A.K. *Language as a Social Semiotic.* Baltimore, MD: University Park Press, 1981.

Hays, Janice N., et al., eds. *The Writer's Mind.* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1983. ED 233 366

Hillocks, George, Jr. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching.* Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Council of Teachers of English, 1986. CS 209 539

Hirsch, E.D., Jr. " 'Cultural Literacy' Doesn't Mean 'Core Curriculum'." *English Journal* 74, No, 6 (1985): 47-49. ED 323 431

Hogan, Robert. "The Hatch Amendment." *SLATE Starter Sheet,* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1985.

Hooper, Susan. "California Measures Promote Teaching of 'Standard English.' " *Education Week* (September 18, 1985): 1, 15.

International Reading Association Computer Technology and Reading Committee. "Guidelines for Educators on Using Computers in the Schools," 1984.

Janson, Jennifer L. "Bennett Emphasizes Importance of Values in Classroom." *Education Daily* (April 3, 1986): 4

Johnson, David W., et al. *Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom.* Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1984.

Kahn, Elizabeth A., et al. *Writing about Literature.* Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Council of Teachers of English, 1984. ED 246 486

Kirby, Dan, and Carol Kuykendall. *Thinking through Language, Book One.* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1985. ED 260 434

Koenke, Karl. *"Becoming a Nation of Readers:* Is BaNoR a Banner?" *Journal of Reading* 29, No. 4 (1986). EJ 326 540

Kreeft, Joy. "Why Not Really Communicate?—In Dialogue Journals." *WATESEL* Working Papers (Fall-Winter 1983-84): 1-13. ED 240 884

Little, Deborah. "Reading and Computers: A Comprehensive Review of the Literature." Unpublished paper, the School of Education, University of Illinois, 1985.

Maxwell, John C., and Diane Allen. "NCTE and IRA Presidents Take Stand on Misuse of Readability Formulas." *Language Arts* 61, No. 8 (1984): 883-84.

Maxwell, John C., and Diane Allen. "NCTE Resolutions Oppose Text Cuts, Punitive Writing Assignments." *English Journal* 74, No. 1 (1985): 101-02.

Mellon, John C. *Transformational Sentence-Combining: A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition.* Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969. ED 018 405

Moffett, James, and Betty Jane Wagner. *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13.* 3rd ed. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1983.

Murphy, Richard T., and Lola Ria Appel. "Evaluation of the Writing to Read Instructional System, 1982-1984." Princeton, N.J.; Educational Testing Service.

Myers, Miles. "The National Writing Project: Literacy and Teaching." *Phi Kappa Phi Journal* 65, No. 4 (1985): 32-34

O'Donnell, Holly, "ERIC/RCS Report: Teaching Teachers to Use Computers." *English Education* 17, No. 1 (1985): 54-61. EJ 311 420

Pradl, Gordon. "Narratology: The Study of Story Structure. ERIC Digest." Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1984. ED 250 698

Rodrigues, Raymond J. "Moving Away from the Writing-Process Worship." *English Journal* 73, No. 5 (1985): 24-27. EJ 320 912

Rosenblatt, Louise M. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work.* Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978. ED 165 145

Rothenberg, Diane. "MicroNotes." *MicroNotes on Children and Computers,* No. 5, 1984. Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Rubin, Donald. *Instructor's Handbook. Project Synapse. Speaking Connections between Speech and Writing.* Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia, 1984.

Schlafly, Phyllis. *Child Abuse in the Classroom.* 2nd ed. Alton, Ill.: Pere Marquette Press, 1985.

Shuman, R. Baird. "Keeping Current in Critical Theory." *English Journal* 73 No. 6 (1984): 59-63. EJ 304 065

Siegel, Marjorie. "Reading as Signification." Ph.D. diss., School of Education, Indiana University, 1984.

Smith, Frank. "Demonstrations, Engagement and Sensitivity: A Revised Approach to Language Learning." *Language Arts* 48, No. 1 (1981): 103-12 EJ 240 334

Smith, William L., et al. *Class Size in English in the Secondary School.* Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Council of Teachers of English, 1986.

Staton, Jana. *Thinking Together: Language Interaction in Children's Reasoning. The Talking and Writing Series, K-12: Successful Classroom Practices.* Washington, D.C.: Dingle Associates, Inc., 1983. ED 233 379

Stevens, William. "Black English Evolving on Its Own."*News-Gazette* March 17, 1985.

Suhor, Charles. "Objective Tests and Writing Samples: How Do They Affect Instruction in Composition." *Phi Delta Kappan* 66, No. 9 (1985): 635-39. EJ 323 620

Thaiss, Christopher. *Language Across the Curriculum in the Elementary Grades.* Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Council of Teachers of English, 1986. CS 209 556

Wheeler, Fay. "Can Word Processing Help the Writing Process?"*Learning* 13, No. 7 (1985): 54-55, 58, 60, 62. EJ 313 019